



DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE **FACT SHEET**

DPC Staff Contact: Jane Eiselein (202) 224-3232 • FAX (202) 228-3432

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The 2000 Democratic Agenda: Access to Quality Education

Public education continues to improve in the United States. Since the passage of the 1994 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, fewer students are dropping out of school, more students with disabilities are being educated in classrooms with other students, and student achievement in mathematics and science is on the rise.¹

While public education is improving in the United States, we must ensure that we have the best possible education system possible and that success reaches all children in every public school. Senate Democrats believe we must continue our efforts to improve public education for all children by:

- recruiting, training, and mentoring high-quality teachers and principals;
- creating smaller classes and smaller learning communities in large schools;
- holding schools accountable for results;
- ensuring that children learn in modern, safe classrooms and repairing schools in urgent need of renovation;
- expanding access to technology;
- ensuring universal access to high-quality pre-school programs;
- expanding access to high-quality after-school programs; and
- making college affordable.

Democratic Policy Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510-7050

Byron Dorgan, Chairman

Recruit and Train High Quality Teachers and Principals

Quality teachers and principals count. The quality of teachers and principals is essential to student achievement. Research indicates that high-quality teachers are the single most important determinant of how well students learn.² States that have initiated intensive recruitment measures and improvements in teacher licensing and professional development in connection with standard-based reform have shown large student achievement gains.³

Teachers need expertise in both subject matter content and teaching skills and too many entering teachers have inadequate preparation in both of these areas.⁴

- More than 12 percent of all newly hired “teachers” enter the workforce without any training at all, and another 15 percent enter without having fully met State standards.
- The percentage of secondary school teachers who hold a degree in their main teaching assignment decreased from 1991 to 1994.
- More than 50,000 individuals who lack the training required for their jobs have entered teaching annually on emergency or substandard licenses.

Too often today, we put new teachers in classrooms with little help and expect them to be expert teachers. This sink-or-swim approach is unfair to new teachers and unfair to students. Twenty-three percent of new teachers leave the profession after only three years. In some urban schools, the attrition rate is 50 percent during the first critical teaching years. However, when new teachers are mentored or get similar kinds of support, their retention rate rises to 93 percent.

Democrats work to assure high-quality teachers and principals for all.

Democrats are working to help local communities recruit and train high-quality teachers. Democrats want to improve teachers’ subject matter knowledge and teaching skills by providing support for mentoring programs for new teachers, and by establishing new incentives to recruit highly qualified teachers.

Smaller classes—100,000 qualified teachers in early grades

Smaller classes work. Research has shown that class size has a significant impact on the quality of education.⁵ Students in small classes:

- outperform students in larger classes on both standardized and curriculum-based tests. This achievement occurs for students in inner city, urban, suburban and rural schools, and for students in the poorest school districts;
- who are students of color had double the achievement effect of other students when the size of class was initially decreased; and
- are more likely to graduate on time and less likely to drop out of school.

A recent study found that ninety-four percent of parents who have children in public schools think small class size is very or somewhat important in elementary school.⁶ In smaller classes, students get the individualized attention they need, and teachers are able to identify and work effectively with students who have learning disabilities, reducing the need for special education in later grades.

The total number of students in the school also affects the quality of education. Research on school size has shown that students who attend smaller schools have increased learning, lower dropout rates, and reduced behavioral problems.⁷ Moreover, students from low-income families who attend schools with fewer students have significantly higher achievement scores than similar students in larger schools.⁸

In response to this research, Congress passed the Class Size Reduction Program as part of the 1999 appropriations bill to hire 100,000 new teachers across the Nation. This program improves education by providing funds directly to local school districts to hire new qualified teachers to reduce class size to 18 students in grades one through three. More than 29,000 teachers were hired with Class Size Reduction Program funds—benefitting approximately 1.7 million children in the 1999-2000 school year. A percentage of these funds is also used for teachers' professional development.

Democrats continue work to decrease the size of classes. The Families First agenda would extend class size reduction by finishing the job of hiring 100,000 new teachers, and ensure that every child in grades one through three gets a solid foundation in the basics. Democrats are also working to help local school districts create small learning communities in larger schools.

Accountability for Results

Schools must be held accountable for better results for children. Democrats believe that learning must be accompanied by high standards and achievement, and that schools must be accountable for improved student achievement. Standards-based reform, put in place by the 1994 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), has resulted in more rigorous and challenging instruction in schools while giving States and school districts flexibility to implement locally-developed reforms.

While States have made great progress in developing and implementing State standards under ESEA, many States are still in the process of aligning assessments, teacher preparation, and teacher professional development with their rigorous standards. As this alignment occurs, we must ensure that incentives and consequences exist that will lead to outcomes related to better student achievement.

We must also ensure that accountability includes the lowest performing students—Democrats expect growth in student performance for all students. Research shows that Title I of the ESEA can narrow the gap between students in low-income areas and other areas.⁹ But this can only happen when we make sure that a qualified teacher is in every Title I classroom, that parents receive school report cards that give them the information they need to hold schools accountable, and that all Federal programs focus on approaches that work.

Democrats work to strengthen accountability measures. Democratic Senators believe we must continue to build accountability measures into Federal support for education to ensure that local school districts and States set high standards. We must help every student achieve by ensuring that programs focus on what works and building on proven reforms, such as qualified teachers in every Title I classroom and public school report cards.

Build and Repair Schools

A gap exists between supply and demand for classrooms in good condition. New and updated classrooms are necessary for quality learning. A growing body of research has linked student achievement and behavior to the physical conditions in the classroom and overcrowding in schools.

- A study of schools in New York City found that students in overcrowded schools scored significantly lower on both mathematics and reading exams than comparable students in less crowded buildings. In addition, students and teachers in overcrowded schools agreed, when asked, that overcrowding negatively affects both classroom activities and instructional techniques.¹⁰
- A study of District of Columbia students found that students in school buildings that were in poor condition had achievement levels 11 percent below students in schools in excellent condition and six percent below students whose schools were in fair condition.¹¹
- Another study of high schools in rural Virginia examined the relationship between building conditions and student achievement. The study found that student scores on achievement tests were up to five percentage points lower in buildings with lower quality ratings, after adjusting for socio-economic status.¹²

Moreover, we need more schools and classrooms.

- Because of the “baby boom echo,” 2,400 new public schools are needed by 2003 to alleviate overcrowding and make space for record enrollments.¹³
- Fully one-third of all public schools need extensive repair or replacement of a building feature (like roofs, plumbing and heating).¹⁴
- Because of the increased use of technology in schools, many schools must install extensive wiring and upgrade their electrical systems.

Democrats fight for safe and uncrowded schools. Democrats are working to help States and school districts build or renovate 6,000 local public schools and repair an additional 8,300 schools to improve learning conditions, end overcrowding, and make smaller classes possible.

Access to Educational Technology

Technology supports good learning. Children with access to computers who have teachers who are computer literate have higher rates of achievement.¹⁵ Technology creates new learning environments and provides access to a vast array of information.¹⁶ Outside of schools, computer and Internet literacy is important in our global, technological economy.

Access to education technology has increased since the 1994 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. For example, in the fall of 1998, 89 percent of public schools were connected to the Internet.¹⁷ More students have access to computers: The ratio of students per multimedia computer decreased from 21 students per computer in 1996-97 to 14 students per computer in 1997-98.¹⁸ The e-rate, which provides Federal discounts for telephone connections, access to the Internet, and the purchase of computer hardware for schools and libraries, is connecting schools, especially in rural areas, to incredible new learning opportunities.

However, the “Digital Divide” (the gap between individuals who have access to technology and those who don’t) is increasing in the United States.¹⁹ In 1998, only 39 percent of classrooms in schools in high-poverty areas were connected to the Internet while 62 percent of classrooms in low-poverty areas were connected.²⁰ Schools need resources to integrate technology into the curriculum and to help teachers modify their teaching practices to use educational technology effectively.

Democrats work to expand access to educational technology. Democrats will fight for programs that provide schools with Internet access and resources for teacher training to fully integrate new technology into classroom teaching and learning. Democrats also are committed to continuing the e-rate discount for schools and libraries.

High-Quality Pre-School Programs

Quality life-long learning opportunities are necessary to continue our economic growth. Life-long learning is one of the keys to success in our global economy. In the U.S., more children are participating in early childhood programs like nursery school, kindergarten and Head Start. We also have reduced the gap between children from low-income families and children from high-income families who attend pre-school.

However, we must do better. Children who attend child care with high quality classroom practices have better language and math skills and have fewer behavioral problems.²¹ At-risk children who attend a high-quality early childhood program have higher high school graduation rates and have higher earnings in later years.

Democrats work to make high-quality pre-school programs available for all. Democratic Senators are working to put America on the path to life-long learning by providing universally available pre-school, more Head Start programs, and funds to improve child care quality.

High-Quality After-School Programs

After-school programs make sense. After-school programs help keep children safe, improve academic performance, and provide enriching experiences for our children.²² While more children are attending after-school programs, long waiting lists exist everywhere. According to the General Accounting Office, the current supply of child care for children attending school will meet only 25 percent of the demand in some urban areas by 2002.

Democrats work to expand after-school programs. Democrats are working to expand enriching opportunities for children and to help prevent youth violence by dramatically expanding safe and high-quality after-school opportunities for students.

Making College Affordable

Attending college makes a difference. Attending college means higher earnings, increases in cognitive ability, and access to better employment opportunities.²³ While more and more individuals are getting college degrees, many students do not attend college because they feel unprepared, lack knowledge about its importance, or cannot afford tuition. Democrats believe we must increase the Federal investment in programs that encourage disadvantaged children to attend and succeed in college and that make college more affordable.

Democrats work to make higher education more affordable and accessible. Senate Democrats are expanding opportunities for all students to attend college by making tuition more affordable. Democrats are committed to providing tax relief and increased funding for college grants, work-study, and loans. Democrats also are working to make learning life-long, by increasing the availability of training and skill-building opportunities.

Endnotes

- ¹ *The Good News About American Education?*, Center on Education Policy and American Youth Policy Forum (2000).
- ² Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond study of variance in NAEP student achievement. See also *To Touch the Future*, American Council on Education (1999).
- ³ American Council on Education (1999).
- ⁴ National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996. See also *The Making of a Teacher*, C. Emily Feistritzer, Center for Education Information (1999) and *The Initial Report of the Secretary on the Quality of Teacher Preparation*, U.S. Department of Education.
- ⁵ STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio) Project and Project Challenge in Tennessee (1999).
- ⁶ American Association of School Administrators 1999 School Survey.
- ⁷ See Funk & Bailey (1999), Vermont Department of Education (1998), Cotton (1996).
- ⁸ *School Size, Poverty, and Student Achievement*, Craig Howley and Robert Bickel, Rural School and Community Trust (2000).
- ⁹ *Accountability & Block Grants: What the Research Says*, Dr. Gary Orfield (2000).
- ¹⁰ Rivera-Batiz and Marti (1995).
- ¹¹ Edwards (1991).
- ¹² Cash (1993).
- ¹³ *No End in Sight*, U.S. Department of Education (1999).
- ¹⁴ *School Facilities: The Condition of America's Schools*, General Accounting Office (1995 and 1996).

- ¹⁵ *Technological Literacy*, U.S. Department of Education.
- ¹⁶ *How People Learn*, National Research Council (1999).
- ¹⁷ *Internet Access in Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994-98*, National Center for Education Statistics (1999).
- ¹⁸ Unpublished tabulations from the Study of Educational Resources and Federal Funding, U.S. Department of Education (1999).
- ¹⁹ Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide," U.S. Department of Commerce (1999).
- ²⁰ *Internet Access in Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994-98*, National Center for Education Statistics (1999).
- ²¹ *Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study*, Peisner-Feinberg et. al., University of North Carolina (1999).
- ²² *Safe and Smart: Making After-School Hours Work for Kids*, U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice (1998).
- ²³ *Straight Talk About College Costs & Prices*, National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education (1998).